

## "Angry Bear" and Me, Cont. - -

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on an empty highway outside of Dubois. It was cool, as daybreak in Wyoming is all year long; and the sun was moving steadily into a cloudless sky. An old Ford clunked to a stop beside me and the driver waved me inside. I threw my pack into the bed and gratefully climbed into the cab. The driver, a gaunt Indian, smiled and told me he could drive me only about 15 miles but was glad to do so anyway.

We got to talking as hitchers and their benevolent drivers always do. I told him where I was from, what I'd been doing and so on, the usual talk. He asked me my name after a long discourse on my part, then said, "I am John Lewis," I live over on the reservation." The way he pronounced his name and where he lived struck me - it was almost like a declaration - a pronouncement to this stranger from the East.

He didn't say much as we drove, nodding his head and shifting the cowboy hat ever so often to shade his eyes from the bright sun. He offered me a job with the lumber outfit he worked for and said I could sleep at his place. I thanked him and happily accepted, ready to give a few weeks to the lumberman's life and this quiet Indian named John Lewis.

We rattled up a dirt road packed with huge holes and bumps, John broke out with several smiles and deep laughs as he watched me smack my head on the roof. Bouncing violently I desperately held tightly onto the seat.

After miles of this we came to the foothills of the Whiskey Mountains and saw the lumber crew. The lumbermen were milling about, joking with each other and pulling on thick gloves. John introduced me to the foreman, a feisty white man who was pleasant but kept telling me what hard work it was. "Think you can handle it boy? It's hard work, hard as-busting work." I assured him that I could handle it and told him I'd done lots of bust-ass work before.

John gave me an old pair of gloves and we headed on down the hill to where some others were already cranking up their whining chain saws and sinking them into tall lodgepole pines. There were several lodgepoles felled at the bottom of the hill, so John and I headed there. Our job was to hook the thick chain which ran down them onto the timber then signal the boys up top to hoist away with their grinding winch. I remembered seeing a movie where the characters were doing the same things I was but it was my real live movie now. All morning we wrapped the chains around fresh trees, pushing and sweating to get it secure, then stepped out of the way as it slowly made its move upward to the flatbed trucks. "Keep out of its way and always listen behind you", said John. "I've seen a man killed when the leg broke loose."

By noon the sun was hot but the air, as always, was dry. The pungent smell of sage swirled about as we tramped through the brush to get to the big timber. John shared his lunch with me; I was ravenous. We sat atop a log facing the mountain ridges looming ahead and I couldn't help thinking what a beautiful place it was to work. I was also thankful I'd been out West for a while and that my body had adjusted to the altitude. I never would have made it through that day if I hadn't. It was Friday, end of the week and payday. I got a day's wages and almost felt like I should be paying them for such a fantastic job in a beautiful place. We stopped by a tavern along with most of the other guys to

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cash our checks and drink some cold Coors beer, nothing better after a day's work. Half the guys on the crew were Indian; the rest were white, part time cowboys and lumberman. There was no racial hatred here as there was in other parts of the country. The people here are friendly, hard-working folk, bred more by nature than a lot of stupid hatred. We talked, joked and drank. I was accepted as one of the hard-working boys; nobody cared where I was from or my reason for being here; I was here and that was enough.

We all got drunk and teased the old woman who ran the place. She was a hardy-pioneer-type woman, carefree and happy even though she made sure I was 21 before she slapped a beer in front of me. We grabbed up a couple of beers to go before we left as there was none to be had on the reservation.

It was still light when we entered the Wind River Indian Reservation, a huge stretch of land that housed Kiowas, Shoshones, Crees, Blackfeet, Crows and Arapahoes. John Lewis was a full blooded Arapahoe and very proud. Modernization hadn't destroyed his pride and beliefs as it had so many other Indians that became begging alcoholics and petty thieves.

The stars were just beginning to show and the air was cool when we pulled in front of a large log cabin. Two children rushed out of the cabin, looking at me curiously but running to their father, clinging to his legs as he laughed and walked toward the house. Before I even got inside I could smell tangy chili. A small clear skinned woman met us; she was John's wife, a Ute Indian from the Colorado, New Mexican reservation. John was proud of her. When he talked that day, most of the conversation was of his wife Anita and his two children, John Jr. and Lynda.

At the table was an old woman of about 70, John's mother, whom he simply introduced as grandmother. The old woman smiled, nodded and went back to dicing apples with bony but nimble fingers. We ate a big delicious meal and I was grateful for Anita's exposure to Mexicans as I ate spicy chili and huge slices of bread to sop it up with. The cabin was spacious and clean. Bare of a great deal of furniture, they were proud to emphasize their bathroom and electric stove.

John told them about my day's work and made jokes of things I did that I hardly remembered. We all watched TV, in which they became totally engrossed. I spent more time watching their expressions than I did television. They would all laugh together when a funny thing popped up and sigh when a bad scene went by. The kids climbed around on me and I played with them between sips of beer, they laughed and pulled my face, delighted that daddy had brought home a new plaything. Both John and I nodded out before long. They offered me the living room floor; grandma slept on the couch, so I humbly retired outside, too exhausted to hassle with the tent. It was a clear night anyway; I was asleep before I'd even zipped up my bag in that beautiful Wyoming night.

The sun woke me early but I simply curled inside my snug cocoon until I felt little hands pulling on me beckoning me to



come inside and eat breakfast. I jumped out of the bag snarling like an animal and chased the kids into the house for the fun of it.

That day we all went shopping on the reservation, I think I was the only white man there. I slipped some money into Anita's hand while we were in the grocery store, making sure John didn't see. He might not approve, even though they weren't rich people; it made me feel better anyway.

That weekend John told me how he had gotten his Indian Name as we walked through the sage flats behind his home. Years ago when he was a boy, he had gone hunting with his father up in the mountains. They were bad times as he said, and the family was in need of fresh meat. High up on a ridge he stumbled upon a she-Grizzly and her cubs. Even then Grizzlies were hard to find in this part of the country but John found one anyway. Alarmed, she attacked young John Lewis, bellowing madly, knocking him down and ripping him across the chest several times with powerful claws before his father sent a single bullet into the she-bear's head, killing her instantly. It was lucky for John that his father's bullet was well-aimed for Grizzlies aren't easily killed. John wasn't hurt seriously and the family had plenty of fresh meat; it was a good sign and he became John "Angry Bear" Lewis.

All Indians in the old days were named through such incidents or the animals they were thought to resemble. Today those ways are mostly gone and John's children will probably never have such names as "Burnt Eagle", "Kicking Bear", "Yellow rain" and "Angry Bear". Times are different now; that's what they're told.

We worked all the week, rotating from the hitching job, to cutting and loading the heavy timber. I was fairly strong when I came there but I grew stronger physically and mentally. A strength I had time to feel and appreciate. At night we ate big meals and split wood for the fireplace on chilly, late August nights. I became very close to the whole family even though they weren't naturally talkative people. When they did speak they took great pains to convey their feeling and understanding.

On Friday we got paid and drunk at the tavern. John got drunk every Friday and the rest of the week never sipped more than two beers a night. His wife never complained and in fact

seemed to take some humor in seeing these two crazy, happy lumbermen.

The second weekend I put some of my theatre carpentry skill into rebuilding their dilapidated woodshed, hoping it would remind them of me whenever they came for wood during the long cold winter ahead. I liked building it anyway. At one point during construction I gave an exaggerated impersonation of a scene designer. I walked about the shed raising my hands in joy and admiring the rough angles as if it were a design by Apia. This sent John rolling with laughter and the kids laughed too, even though they didn't understand. I doubt if John really understood either, he just thought it was absurd.

John would talk a great deal of the "oldways" of his people at anytime a feeling came to him. He blended the "old ways" with the necessities of the new ones and managed to come up with a working lifestyle. He told me his father dealt strictly in the old ways and influenced him greatly. The old man died years ago and to my shock he was the same man John had seen crushed to death by a falling timber. He waited until my stay was drawing to a close to tell me this, but I suppose that was his way.

He was upset that I would not be around in fall when he would go to the mountains to bring down an elk or pronghorn deer. I was sorry, too, for I would have loved nothing better than to hunt with him and taste a sizzling elk steak cooked by Anita.

On Friday I collected my final paycheck and told the foreman I would be leaving this bust-ass work regretfully. He told me to come back and work if I was ever out this way again. "Could always use a man like you," he said, in the same hearty voice which had warned me about the work when I first came.

That night the kids tugged on me and asked me how far I had to go to get home and if I'd come back to see them and work with daddy. I assured them I would return one day, a promise which I intend to keep. No one in the family ever seemed curious about the East or the cities I've lived in. They had no great desire to leave the reservation. Their life was good for them no matter how hard it was. I think they were acutely aware of this. As the night grew late I watched John take his pretty wife off to bed and I felt happy for them both; I shared his life for a little while and learned to love both of them.

The next morning after a hearty breakfast and uncomfortable good-byes which I've always disliked whenever I leave a place and people that were good to me, John took me down to the highway; he seemed to go slower than the old truck usually went. The kids also went along, digging the ride. After many hearty handshakes and pats on the back they left me. I felt alone on the road and wanted to get moving. Those good people had taken me into their home without doing any of the obvious social graces, made me feel wanted and gave me everything they had. It was a long trip but filled with the memory of my past weeks all the way back home, many rides and miles gone by.

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